

**ASSESSMENT PROGRESS REPORT
MASTERS DEGREE IN APPLIED COMMUNICATION STUDIES
COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES**

ANNUAL REPORT - MARCH 2011

Robert R. Ulmer, Ph.D., Chair

Gerald Driskill, Ph. D., College Assessment Committee

OVERVIEW: Our M.A. program is guided and informed by various assessment processes. Five years ago we made a major change in our program and final project. In the past all students completed communication training as their final project. Now, the communication training is just one possible outcome of a common focus on a case study analysis found throughout the program. Students may also give presentations focused on recommendations or intervention plans. Student learning continues to be the focus of our efforts. Our data reveal that students are reaching program goals as we focus on deep learning throughout the two-year track program. Nonetheless, as we enter the final year of our five-year plan, we are reflecting on adjustments to further enhance the learning process.

(1) Student learning goal(s) addressed each year:

The primary goal of the program is to guide students in the application of communication theory to a variety of interpersonal, institutional, public, and organizational contexts. Learning outcomes associated with the following three program objectives are assessed each year. Students successfully completing the *Master of Arts in Applied Communication Studies* (MAACS) should be able to:

- A. understand and engage in applied communication research;
- B. develop ethically responsible recommendations for applied communication contexts; and
- C. make effective presentations to shape or inform communication practices.

(2) What learning outcomes were addressed this year? & (3) What courses & activities were assessed? & (4) What methods were used?

We have developed several learning outcomes for each goal and seek to assess these each year. Table 1 captures our program goals, learning outcomes, location of assessment and methods.

**Table 1: Applied Communication Studies
Goal, Outcomes, Location of Assessment & Methods**

Program Goals	Learning Outcomes	Location of Assessment	Methods
A. understand and engage in applied communication research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on relevant communication theory and concepts • States a thesis that clearly articulates a position on issues in the case • Argument includes relevant examples, references & theories • Apply communication theory to case that enhances understanding of the case 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comp exam-Part of final core course • Final Project • Final Portfolio-Part of Final Project defense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See Appendix C for assessment rubric for analysis of comp responses • See Appendix D for assessment rubric for final paper
B. develop ethically responsible recommendations for applied communication contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear connections to communication theory found in recommendations • Demonstrate an awareness of ethical issues in wording of recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Comp exam-Part of final core course ○ Final Project ○ Final Portfolio-Part of Final Project defense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See Appendix C for assessment rubric for analysis of comp responses • See Appendix D for assessment rubric for final paper
C. make effective presentations to shape or inform communication practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate effective presentation skills based on program guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Final Project presented to professional audience approved by faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Post assessment of presentation by participants with instrument approved by faculty ○ See Appendix B for example instrument

Our five year plan (Table 2) integrates other critical aspects of assessment, including stakeholder involvement. Again, the master’s paper serves as a cornerstone of our assessment effort in that during the defense of this final paper, student discuss their progress via self reflection on a collection of a papers they have placed in a portfolio, as well as feedback they gained on their final presentation. This final presentation feedback provides data from a variety of stakeholders including professionals in the field.

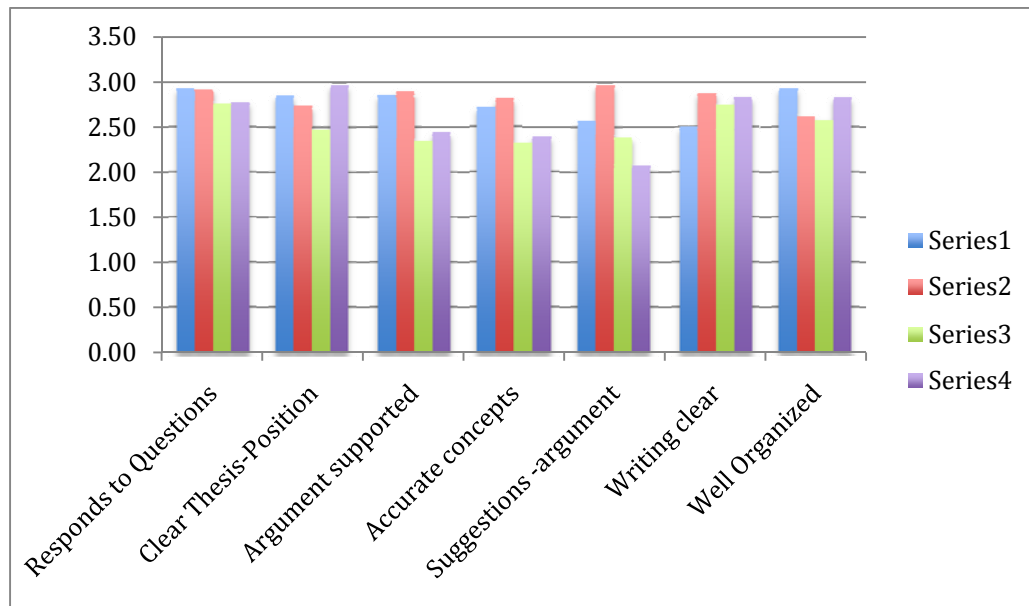
Table 2: Five Year Assessment Plan - MAACS (2007 - 2012)		
Where Assessed/Assessment Tool	Cycle	Report Year
End of two year track: Collection of M.A. Paper, Portfolio, and Comprehensive Exam data to examine trends	Yearly/Data combined	Every year
Course level: Individual faculty collect data on teaching strategies and specific learning outcomes (part of Professional Growth Contract)	Yearly	2006 & 2011
Meeting of faculty to discuss all assessment data analysis	Yearly	Every year
Survey representative group of alumni	3 years	2007 & 2010
Discuss assessment plan and make improvements	3 years	2006 & 2009

(5) What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

We gather data from comp exams and final student papers to assess program goal A: *understand and engage in original applied communication research* and goal B: *develop ethically responsible recommendations for applied communication contexts*; we made the following observations.

First, concerning comp exams, Appendix C contains the rubric used for assessing comps. We began tabulating data from the feedback rubric in 2007. Table 3 provides average responses for faculty evaluations for the past **four** years. The data prompt several observations.

Table 3: Comprehensive Exams: Faculty Evaluations
Series 1: 2007 Series 2: 2008 Series 3: 2009 Series 4: 2010



1. In 2010, the cohort of six students all passed their comps. Students, based on average scores, displayed stronger performances than the previous year.
2. *In particular, 2010 students scored high on four of the seven criteria -above 2.75/30.* Students displayed a high level of competence in stating their position, writing clearly and providing a well-organized response.
3. We are monitoring the lower scores in the area of well-supported arguments and making suggestions or recommendations. While students passed in these areas, scored were low in both areas for the second consecutive year.
 - a. **Second, concerning final case study projects**, students are well prepared to conduct a final case analysis. Five years ago we implemented a case study approach. Students are introduced to this approach in the first semester and then in the following semesters, they take four core courses that each include a case analysis. Our current process involves students drafting a proposal with their faculty advisor who then prepares the student for a proposal defense with a committee. Upon completing the final project, students defend their paper before their advisor and two faculty committee members and refine their paper based on shared criteria (See Appendix D).
 - b. **Students continue to complete quality projects that meet program criteria.** The cohort group from 2008 had an 83% completion rate or (5 of 6); a marked increase from the 63% completion rate of the year before.

We continue to work with students to finish projects while still holding them to program final project requirements.

Finally, concerning, program goal C: *make effective presentations to shape or inform communication practices*, we have revised our rubric based on program changes.

- In 2007, the final project shifted from a sole focus on communication training to more varied final presentations formats ranging from conference presentations, trainings to executive summaries.
- Our students continue to give presentations in their classes of the cases they analyze. We also have students reflect on their progress on these criteria in their final portfolio.
- We have students making final presentations to varied audiences: Arkansas Department of Health, Department of Defense, the National Communication Association, and at UALR's Graduate Student Research Forum.
- The varied nature of the audiences and the fact that faculty are not able to be present at all these presentations has meant the need to develop a new process that will involve external evaluators. For instance, we have had students present via an interactive, national phone conference. The criteria used in this forum are different from a presentation for UALR's Graduate Student Research Forum.
- We have reviewed a shared presentation rubric (Appendix B) and agreed to begin having select audience members complete this rubric to gain another form of feedback on student performances.

Assessment Highlights- 2010

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

Our five-year plan includes annual department wide discussion of our assessment data to discern trends. Based on exit interviews, student performances on projects, and trends in our field, we took action this year to continue to enhance our program to positively impact student learning. The following five areas reflect decisions we have made which include discussions we are initiating with stakeholder groups to enhance our program.

- 1. We have seen initial success in our efforts to aid students in more timely completion of final projects.**
 - c. Over the past ten years, completion rates of final projects have varied widely—from 50% to 100%. While the average who eventually complete is over 80%, we would like students to finish within a two or two and half year frame.
 - d. Most of our students work full time and their project involves community organizations, thus it is not uncommon for student to need the summer and possible the fall to complete a project.

- e. We have encouraged students to work on their proposal earlier in their final year and we require students to present their proposal as part of our final seminar course.
 - f. The cohort class from 2007 has had only 63% (7 of 11) finish their final projects. However, the cohort group from 2008 has had a 83% rate or (5 of 6).
 - g. We plan to continue to find ways to encourage all of our students to finish in a 2 to 2 1/2 year time frame.
- 2. We continue to discuss the timing and format of our comprehensive exams in our assessment of student learning.**
- a. Our comp exam process was devised before we implemented a common case approach throughout our program, culminating in a final case analysis project.
 - b. Concerning timing, we are discussing the value of having a comp process before the student begins a final project. In our current system, the case study comp process occurs at the end of all course work as well as after many students has completed the final project. Thus, the comp does not provide formative feedback.
 - c. Concerning content, we are discussing the use of a reflective comp process as opposed to one that requires another case study. This shift would require a student to reflect on their learning over the two years in terms of specific learning outcomes.
- 3. Our advisory board continues to grow and develop momentum.**
- a. We have grown our board to seven members with a goal of having 10-12 join by 2012.
 - b. We reached our goals of establishing a scholarship fund. Board members, alumni, and faculty now work to grow the fund.
 - c. For the second year, a board member was present at our Spring Celebration (award ceremony) to welcome new graduates into our alumni group.
- 4. Faculty Growth Contracts function to closing the assessment loop.** We encourage faculty to reflect on three major questions that tie back to our program assessment and on going efforts to enhance student learning:
- How can we enhance deep learning across the program?
 - How can we develop student mindsets by challenging communication misconceptions?
 - How can we improve our case study approach to communication analysis to ensure continuity across the program?

These discussions resulted in three positive outcomes:

- *First, we began gathering data in Fall 2010 on a “misconceptions survey” with our graduate students.* This survey was developed as part of our 1300 assessment program. We plan to gather data again from this

group near the end of the program to gauge the way our graduate students are able to reflect on and identify common problematic assumptions about the nature of communication.

- **Second, we are discussing ways to ensure that basic case study criteria are being addressed in all of our syllabi.** In particular, we are paying attention to helping students develop well-supported arguments and making suggestions or recommendations.
- **We are piloting hybrid (on campus/on line) courses.** Students, based on exit interviews and informal feedback, prefer the face-to-face format in our evening and weekend program. However, students have also indicated the potential value in having a few courses function in a hybrid format. We are currently piloting this option.

5. Faculty and Stakeholder involvement

Our program demonstrates a commitment to a wide array of faculty and stakeholder involvement. We again review these here as a way to provide a clearer picture of the breadth and depth of our formal and informal assessment and development activities.

- *Engaging alumni with news links on our home page.* We provide alumni with regular news items and provide more opportunities of alumni connections and departmental updates.
- *Faculty Involvement.* All tenure-track faculty teach in our graduate program. All faculty review and approve changes to our assessment plan. All faculty review and grade the comprehensive case study exam. All faculty serve as advisor and committee members on the final project, including as committee members reading drafts of the final paper, participating in one formal meeting at the action planning stage and a presentation of the paper at the end, and as committee chairs attending and evaluating the "dress rehearsal" of the intervention, reading multiple drafts, and coordinating the final project process.
- *Exit Interviews.* All students are involved in exit interviews in which their evaluation of the program is elicited. This information will continue to be used to change course content, program structure, and to generally inform the faculty as to the changing needs of our students.
- *Class Evaluations.* Student evaluations are taken very seriously by the department. They are read by the chair and issues that arise from the class evaluations are discussed with the faculty in question. The discussion includes possible reasons for the issue of concern and potential steps to address the issue. All faculty respond well to this format and are eager to continue to improve their classes and the program in general.
- *Self-assessments.* Students engage in a self-assessment as part of their final project and write a reflective essay as a cover to their portfolio. This process requires reflection on their abilities to apply theories and concepts learned in the program.

- *Organizational clients.* Our alumni often serve as organizational clients for our students in their final projects. Because of their involvement with the program, they know what the student should be capable of and can hold him/her accountable for those competencies. Also, by serving as organizational clients, they can keep us abreast of ways to enhance our teaching content.
- *Organizational stake holders.* Our stakeholders hear student presentations/trainings and are also involved in program evaluation. Their feedback is part of the data we use in evaluating the final project and is thus part of the feedback loop.

SUMMARY: We are encouraged by the continued enhancements to our graduate-level assessment process and have evidence that it has enabled us to formalize our efforts and systematize our plans for growth and development. Analysis of this year's assessment data for the graduate program has resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Our faculty is heavily invested in every aspect of our assessment process.
2. Students, alumni, and other stakeholders are engaged in our assessment efforts.
3. Our final semester seminar course reflects our commitment to deep learning.
4. Our students engage in a variety of applied venues including presentations at professional conferences and with government and nonprofit organizations.
5. Student performances on final projects and comp exams indicate that we are reaching our program goals.
6. In the coming year will plan to gather additional stakeholder data from final presentations as well as input from our alumni.

Appendix A: Program Objectives by First Year Course

Emphasis: Extensive Somewhat Little None
Assessed: Exam Paper Project Other Not Assessed

MA Example:

		MA Program Goal: The primary goal of the program is to guide students in the application of communication theory to a variety of interpersonal, institutional, public, and organizational contexts.		
Core Course and Program year _____	How Outcomes are Addressed and Assessed	Objective A: understand and engage in applied communication research	Objective B: develop ethically responsible recommendations for applied communication contexts	Objective C: make effective presentations to shape or inform communication practices
SPCH 7321 Org. Communication Theory <hr/> First Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Somewhat Speech; Papers	Somewhat Speech; Papers	Extensive Present case
SPCH 7301: Communication Theory <hr/> First Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Extensive Weekly paper; exam, final paper	Somewhat Weekly papers	Somewhat Weekly papers; final paper
SPCH 73222 Comm. Cultures and Contexts <hr/> First Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Extensive Speech; Paper, Case studies; Exams	Extensive Speech; Paper, Case studies; Exams	Extensive Present Cultural Analysis Project
SPCH 7350 Crisis Communication <hr/> First Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Somewhat Case Study	Extensive Case Study	Extensive Present Crisis Case Analysis

SPCH 7320: Communicating Change <hr/> Second Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Somewhat Speech; Papers	Somewhat Speech; Papers	Extensive Present case
SPCH 7302: Interpersonal Communication Theory and contexts <hr/> Second Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Extensive Weekly paper; exam, final paper	Somewhat Weekly papers	Somewhat Weekly papers; final paper
SPCH 7351 Managerial Communication <hr/> Second Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Extensive Speech; Paper, Case studies;	Extensive Speech; Papers	Extensive Present Draft of Final Project Presentation
SPCH 7323 Conflict Analysis <hr/> Second Year	Emphasis: Assessed:	Somewhat Case Study	Extensive Case Study	Extensive Present Case Analysis

Appendix B: Presentation/Training Facilitation Skills Rubric

PRESENTATION FEEDBACK

PLEASE INDICATE YOUR AGREEMENT WITH EACH STATEMENT, USING A SCALE OF 1-5, 1=STRONGLY DISAGREE TO 5=STRONGLY AGREE

PRESENTATION STYLE/SKILLS

- The facilitator/presenter promoted participant discussion and involvement. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter gave clear instructions for activities. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter processed activities well. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter kept the discussion on topic and activities on track. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter did not appear rushed. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter handled participant ideas/questions effectively. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter displayed confidence in the role. 1 2 3 4 5

PRESENTATION CONTENT/STRUCTURE

- The objectives were clear. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter clearly conveyed the importance of the topic 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter appeared knowledgeable about the subject. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter presented information in an appropriate sequence. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter used transitions well. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter clearly indicated ways learning could be transferred to a professional/personal environment. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter used language appropriate to the audience. 1 2 3 4 5
- The facilitator/presenter summarized the session. 1 2 3 4 5
- Handouts and other materials were professional. 1 2 3 4 5

PLEASE NOTE SPECIFIC STRENGTHS

PLEASE NOTE ANY SUGGESTIONS YOU BELIEVE WOULD IMPROVE:

Appendix C: Comprehensive Exam Assessment Rubric----Revised 2008

Student Letter: ___ Question number: ___ Category(circle one): Org / IP / OD
MA-Applied Communication: Assessment Questions

Direction for Rubric: Please use the following rating scale with the understanding that the rating will not be viewed by the students, but will help guide our assessment. I encourage you to fill this out as you grade each one and let your ratings guide your decision as to P or NP. Again, the students will not see your actual ratings.

Please type in your responses below and then send the form to me electronically. You may confer with another faculty if you want to fill out the form together. I will provide one electronic blank form with the idea that you can “save as” and continue to use this template for each response.

Please include the student letter (A-G) the, question number (1, 2a or 2b) in the name of your file along with the word “assess” and the year “08”): For example:
A1assess08.doc

- 0 = criteria is not addressed
- 1= criteria is addressed, but not developed
- 2= criteria is clearly addressed

- To pass a student should receive a "yes" (a 1 or 2) on each of the following.

___ 1. Responds to each part of the question

___ 2. Clearly states a thesis that clearly states a position on issues in case

___ 3. Argument for thesis includes relevant examples, references & theories (min. 4 references)

___ 4. Accurate use of concepts, terminology, and theory

___ 5. Suggestions for practical implications drawn from argument

___ 6. Write in a manner that is clear (relatively free of grammar and spelling problems)

___ 7. Well organized (intro, previews, clear main points, summary restates position)

Comments:

1. What was missing or not adequately developed in the response?
2. What possible patterns of learning strengths emerged?
3. What possible patterns of learning needs emerged?
4. Other comments/assessment insights

Appendix D: Assessment Rubric for Final Paper
MA-Applied Communication
Revised 2010

Direction for Rubric:

Please use the following rating scale with the understanding that the rating will not be viewed by the students, but will help guide our assessment. I encourage you to fill this out after a student defends the final paper. Again, the students will not see your actual ratings.

Please type in your responses on the electronic excel sheet that I provide.

- 0 = criteria is not addressed
- 1= criteria is addressed, but not developed
- 2= criteria is clearly addressed

- ___ 1. Focuses on relevant communication theory and concepts
- ___ 2. States a thesis that clearly articulates a position on issues in the case
- ___ 3. Argument includes relevant examples, references & theories
- ___ 4. Apply communication theory to case that enhances understanding of the case
- ___ 5. Accurate use of concepts, terminology, and theory
- ___ 6. Practical implications drawn from argument in an ethically appropriate manner
- ___ 7. Write in a manner that is clear (relatively free of grammar and spelling problems)
- ___ 8. Well organized (intro, previews, clear main points, summary that restates position)

Comments:

1. What was missing or not adequately developed in the drafting process?
2. What possible patterns of learning strengths emerged?
3. What possible patterns of learning needs emerged?
4. Other comments/assessment insights?